DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 093 782 SO 007 640

AUTHOR Bennett, Roger V.
TITLE Death and the Curriculum.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Meeting (Chicago, April 15-19, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Design; *Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Research; *Death; Educational Innovation; *Educational Needs; Educational Objectives; Educational Planning; Educational Research; Elementary Education; Evaluation Methods; Models; *Relevance (Education); Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

A study to discover why a significant void exists in the area of death education reports on the following objectives: (1) to design a conceptual framework for planning and evaluating death education: (2) to determine existence of a legitimate need to incorporate death education into elementary and secondary curricula; (3) to evaluate the feasibility of designing curricula on death and dying; and (4) to derive recommendations from this investigation for planning, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating death curricula. A theoretical rationale is represented graphically by a conceptual framework to assess curricular potentialities of death and dying. Procedures utilized to collect, analyze, and evaluate data are outlined in relation to foundations of the curriculum, curricular organizing centers, and teaching-learning interaction. Findings and recommendations report that the conceptual framework is a useful analytic tool for systematically researching the complexities of curriculum development and that the issue of death is a useful vehicle to develop, study, and improve strategies for introducing controversial and innovative curricula. (Author/KSM)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 093782

SP 007 640

10.03
18p
50

DEATH AND THE CURRICULUM*

Roger V. Bennett
University of Maryland

Perspective of the Problem

Conspicuously absent in contemporary humanistic curricula is any organized effort to educate children and youth to cope adequately with one of life's most fundamental realities--death. If affective outcomes are important, then why does such a significant void exist in modern curriculum? The present research was designed to investigate this "if-then" proposition.

Objectives

Specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To design a conceptual framework that could be utilized to guide both the planning and evaluation of controversial innovative curricula, e.g., death education.
2. To determine if there is a legitimate need to incorporate the study of death and dying into elementary and secondary school curricula.
3. To evaluate the feasibility of designing curricula organizing strategies that deal with death and dying for children and youth.

---

*Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association meeting. Chicago. April, 1974. Inquiries should be addressed to Roger V. Bennett, 4306 College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742.

4. If warrented and feasible, to derive precise recommendations from this investigation for (a) planning, (b) implementing, (c) evaluating, and (d) disseminating death curricula.

Theoretical Rationale

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the conceptual framework used to assess the curricular potentialities of death and dying. The three rings identify distinct planes of curriculum operations. Thus, it is acknowledged that there are different levels of decision-making and actions. The elongated arrows extending from the outer rim to the inner circle indicate the temporal relationship among the planes as well as the general direction of evolving activities. These arrows also suggest the interdependence of the decisions and actions at the various levels and point to the focus of all curriculum operations, i.e., teaching-learning interaction. As illustrated, each operational plane is divided into analytically discrete constellations of dynamic variables. The interrupted boundary lines and the two-way connecting arrows denote interactions among subsumed variables as well as whole constellations. Viewed in two dimensions this conception reveals simultaneous interrelationships and interactions along both horizontal and vertical axes. The complementary interface among the components of this total "action system" are indicative of a continuous spiraling sequence of events. Because of the complexities and dynamics of the whole system, intervention at any given point sets into motion a "ripple-effect" that manifests itself in subsequent

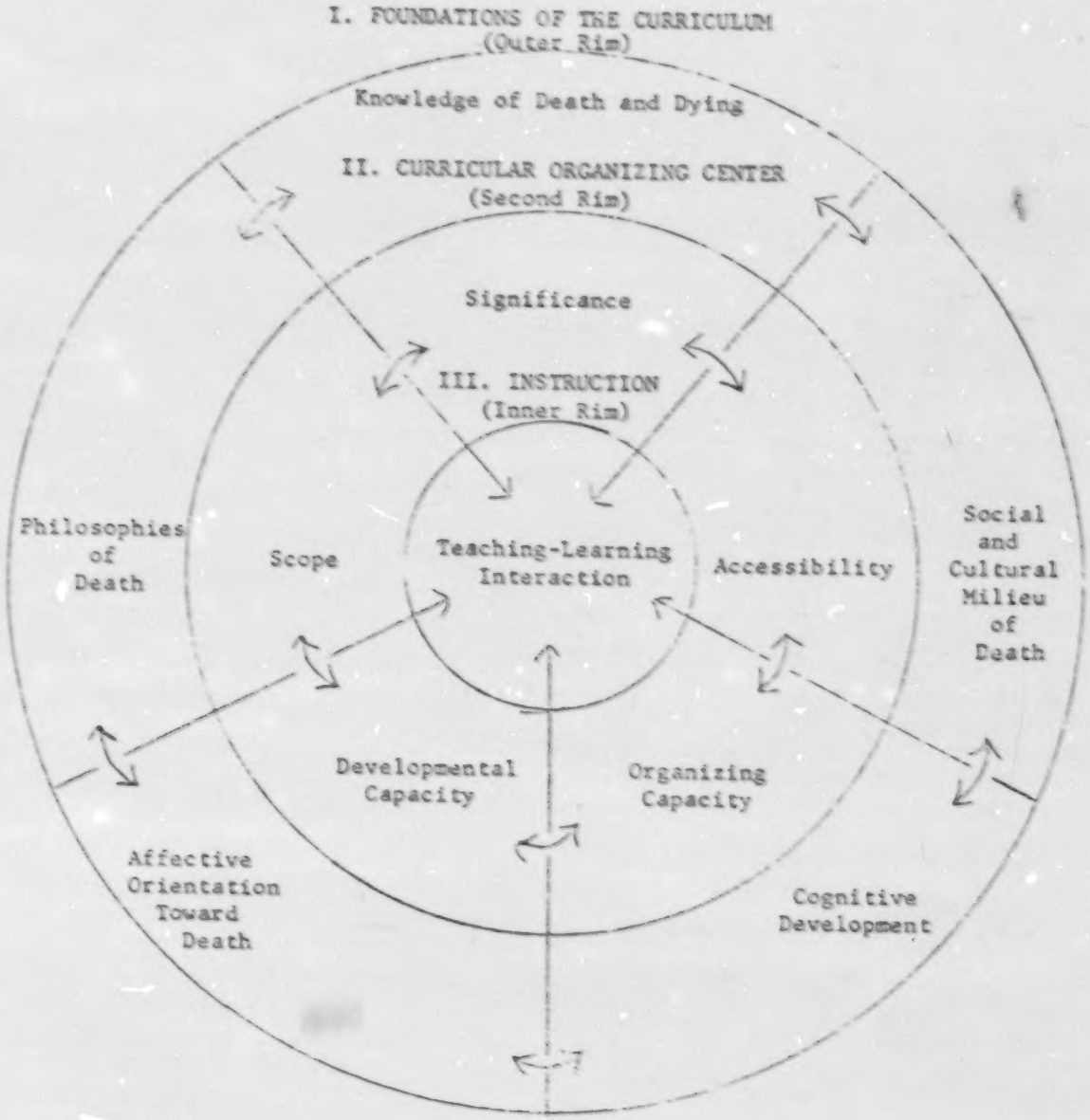

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Death Curricula

Roger V. Bennett. 4306 College of Education. University of Maryland. College Park, Maryland 20742.

occurrences. The result of such a synergy is a greater change than the sum of the independent efforts of the separate elements. This holistic conception of reality tends to discredit traditional "black-box" paradigms that attempt to describe, explain, and predict curricular phenomena in simple cause-and-effect relationships. Utilization of the conceptual framework designed for the present research supported this thesis.

Application of the Framework

For the purposes of the current study, the foundations level shown in Figure 1 was divided into four constellations of variables. Collectively, these sources of inputs were considered essential for developing death curricula. For example, the affective realm contains the individual's (a) perceptions, (b) fears, (c) anxieties, (d) characterizations, and (e) defense mechanisms. The individual's cognitive development incorporates such variables as a person's learning style and his/her present capacity to comprehend such abstractions as the irreversability of death. Funeral practices and language taboos are examples of specific referents in the social and cultural domain. The knowledge category includes a number of variables ranging from specific bits of demographic data to established generalizations regarding the dying process. Pragmatism and existentialism are representative of basic considerations in the philosophical realm.

Using the foundations level as a departure point, attention was directed toward the following concerns in the present study: (a) Is the knowledge of death and dyirg adequate for developing elementary and secondary school curricula? (b) Will the present social and cultural milieu support the development and implementation of in-school death

education for children and youth? (c) Are existing philosophies of death compatible with values and valuing processes advocated for contemporary elementary and secondary school curricula? (d) Will the cognitive development of children and youth permit the assimilation and/or accommodation of concepts of death and dying? (e) Can the affective orientations of children and youth toward death and dying be modified through in-school educative experiences?

Should adequate foundations exist, then it is possible to move to the next level of curriculum operation, i.e., selecting curricular organizing centers. Characteristics of effective centers, as discussed by Herrick, et al. (1956, 1962); Taba (1962); and Goodlad (1964, 1966), are identified in the middle ring of Figure 1. In the present investigation these qualities were redefined as follows:

1. Significance. The organizing center has a high degree of personal importance for the learners. It also has considerable potential in the field of thanatology, i.e., the study of death phenomena. Finally, the center is generally prized in the culture.
2. Accessibility. The organizing center is easily available to the learners. Some mix of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor interaction is possible with the center.
3. Organizing Capacity. The center can link past, present, and future educative experiences. It relates ideas, decisions, actions, and consequences. It provides a focal point of attention for many kinds of learning.
4. Developmental Capacity. The organizing center is open-ended, permitting learners to extend their own levels of understanding.

Divergent thinking is facilitated by using the center. Higher levels of cognition and affective valuing are attainable.

5. Scope. The organizing center is sufficiently multidimensional to allow analyses from several perspectives, e.g., economic, social, political, etc. The center has meaning for a broad range of people as opposed to being relevant only to a select group. Lastly, the center possesses a high degree of mobility, i.e., it can move through various (a) time periods, (b) cultures, and (c) socioeconomic systems.

With respect to the current research, specific concerns arising at this level were derived from the following general question: Does death exhibit the characteristics of an effective curricular organizing center?

"Teaching-Learning Interaction" appears as the vortex of all curriculum activity in the conceptual framework. Operationally, this construct is visible in the reciprocal exchanges of cognitive, verbal, and affective behaviors among students and teachers. Underlying personal values and overt communication systems exemplify some of the implicit variables that influence total interaction patterns. Concerns at this level of curriculum operation emanated from the following overarching inquiry: Can teaching and learning systems, as defined by Macdonald (1965), adjust sufficiently to maximize positive educative experiences within death curricula?

Research Methods and Data Sources

Procedures utilized to collect, analyze, and evaluate data are summarily outlined below:

Foundations of the Curriculum

Techniques employed at this level included:

1. Interviewing 38 specialists representing 17 fields, e.g., neurosurgery, dermatology, psychiatry, nursing, theology, philosophy, etc. These individuals were selected to represent a spectrum of persons involved with death and dying. At one end of the continuum were those persons most frequently and intimately involved with death, e.g., brain surgeons, cancer ward nurses, etc. At the other end of the continuum were individuals who have remote contact with death, e.g., dermatologists, philosophers, etc.
2. Critiquing 12 hours of videotapes and supplementary instructional packages used in Bader and Flathery's (1972) Crisis, Awareness, Management Project at Walter Reed Hospital. Briefly, this project dealt with the design, implementation, and evaluation of small group seminars focusing on the care of terminally ill patients. Seminar groups consisted of medical personnel, hospital chaplians, family social workers, etc.
3. Auditing Leviton's (1972) undergraduate death education course at the University of Maryland. Learning activities included large group lectures, small group seminars, field trips to such places as city morgues, funeral homes, and other death-related institutions and individual research projects.
4. Conducting a telephone survey of 100 randomly selected subjects regarding death education for children and youth. These subjects were selected from the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. telephone directory. Attitudes toward death education in

public schools was the central focus of the survey. Personal attitudes as well as demographic data were also collected.

5. Recording and analyzing national conferences, e.g., The Kennedy Foundation International Symposium (1971), entitled "Choices On Our Consciences," The Child Welfare League National Meeting (1972) dealing with "Grief and Loss," etc. Follow-up activities included informal interviews with several keynote speakers, on-site visitations and correspondence.
6. Interviewing 15 elementary and 15 secondary students. The elementary subjects were selected from a pool recommended by the classroom teachers in a suburban Washington, D. C. school system. All of the elementary subjects were drawn from one school. A similar procedure was used to select the secondary students with the exception that they were drawn from another school system, which may be characterized as an urban culturally-deprived population.
7. Reviewing 196 MEDLINE, 20 MEDLARS, and 14 ERIC researches published between January 1969 and November 1972.
8. Studying 23 books and numerous articles, e.g., Feifel (1959), Grollman (1967), Green and Irish (1971), Kubler-Ross (1969), Weisman (1972), etc. Criteria for selecting these books and articles were derived from the elements conceptualized in the theoretical framework.

Curricular Organizing Centers

1. Administering a written survey to 40 randomly selected Subjects from three graduate education classes. The respondents included students majoring in curriculum, practicing teachers

and administrators, and a few non-educators. The survey instrument was designed to identify potentially useful organizing centers.

2. Refining and supplementing the list of potential centers generated by the survey.
3. Preparing a descriptive overview of each of the identified organizing centers.
4. Obtaining judgements from four panels composed of 7 elementary teachers, 5 secondary teachers, 3 human development specialists, and 4 curriculum professors.
5. Designing an instructional strategy for elementary school children using a series of death-related organizing centers. The strategy consisted of 8 days of instruction divided into two four-day weeks. Each daily lesson was approximately 30 minutes in length. As planned, the organizing centers were arranged in a sequence from remote non-human death to close personally related death. Thus, the organizing center used on the first day dealt with the death of plants. The final organizing center on the last day of instruction was intended to deal with the learner's own death. Intervening centers were focused upon the death of pets, strangers, close friends, and immediate family members. It is significant to note that the underlying rationale for the planned sequence emerged from the panel of judges. It may be inferred this approach itself reflects educators generally conservative orientation to controversial curricula. Unfortunately, the students evolved their own sequence based on their immediate interests, experiences, and

concerns. Consequently, on the second day of instruction the question of death in the family arose. Thereafter the students insisted on "leap-frogging" from one organizing center to another with personal relevance being the guiding determinant. Teachers soon learned to adjust the planned sequence to the evolving student learning strategy. The overall strategy was designed to employ to tactical approaches. During the first week an inquiry format was used to open and stimulate student thinking. The second four-day week was designed to shift to an expository format to allow the teacher to guide the discussion of human death. This aspect of the overall strategy was maintained.

Teaching-Learning Interaction

1. Implementing the instructional strategy in an ungraded class containing 30 children ranging in ages from six to twelve.
2. Objective daily logs of pupil activities and subjective self-analysis of teacher affect were used to continuously evaluate and plan the on-going strategies. Each teacher was asked to write daily: (a) objective descriptions of student activities, behaviors, and observed reactions; (b) introspective analyses of their own feelings about the lesson; and (c) one case study of a student of their own choice.
3. Using a three member panel to evaluate videotapes of episodic interactions. Videotapes were made of at least one episode within each lesson. Other tapes were also made of the same students interacting in other subject areas of the curriculum.

The purpose of the two sets of tapes was to compare and contrast student interaction patterns when dealing with death-related and neutral organizing centers.

4. Administering Bennett's (1970) "Pupil Affect Index: Today's Lesson" to every pupil after each lesson.

5. Analyzing five recorded small group "rap sessions" with a total of 30 high school students. Each group consisted of two tenth, two eleventh, and two twelfth grade students. One male and one female student from each grade was randomly selected from intact English class rosters. During these "rap sessions" attention was focused on discussing concepts of death, concerns about one's own death, fears, anxieties, mass media portrayals and the interest in and need for death education.

Findings

1. Considerable evidence was found that death has not been omitted from humanistic curricula inadvertently, but rather because of clearly discernible reasons. For example, death is one of our culture's most persistent taboos. The segments of society investigated in this study, including especially germane professions, are grossly under-educated regarding the complexity of death.

2. There is a legitimate need to incorporate the study of death and dying into elementary and secondary school curricula. Death was found to be a constant theme in the (a) public, (b) private, (c) real, and (d) fantasy worlds of children and youth. Important

relationships were reported between an individual's orientation toward death and his/her (a) self-concept, (b) early experience with death, (c) psychological well-being, (d) life style, and (e) attitude toward school. There was widespread agreement that myths and misconceptions persist among children and youth because of inadequate education by parents and other social agencies. A growing interdisciplinary consensus was revealed that our present "death-system" can and should be changed through an improved educational process.

3. It is feasible to design curricular experiences that deal with death and dying for children and youth. Sufficient empirical data were found to provide the necessary knowledge base. Although the present social and cultural milieu fosters denial and avoidance, this traditional value orientation is now in flux. Humanistic philosophies are compatible with "transactional" curricular experiences, whereas traditional philosophies are conducive to "transmittal" experiences. Children in this study under the age of eight had great difficulty assimilating and/or accommodating adult concepts of death. However, these same Subjects did reveal their own concepts of death, which could provide a basis for designing introductory curricular experiences. The "openness" of the affective orientation of children and youth toward death was found to be inversely related to age, with three overlapping stages evident: (a) "uninhibited," (b) "indifference," and (c) "reluctance." Death possesses all the essential characteristics of effective organizing centers. The planning, implementation, and evaluation of an instructional strategy using death-related organizing centers substantiated this finding. Teaching and learning systems were adjusted and stimulated a free-flowing pattern of interaction.

Recommendations

Preliminary findings of the current study as well as researches by Bennett, et al. (1972), and Bennett and Everett (1974) provide the basis for the following recommendations pertaining to (a) planning, (b) implementing, (c) evaluating, and (d) disseminating death curricula:

Planning

1. Effective planning should be guided by some conceptual framework.
2. A survey of community attitudes toward death curricula for children and youth should be conducted as an initial step. "Support" and "Resistance" groups should be identified.
3. A comprehensive community education program should be initiated to lay the foundation for introducing death curricula into the schools. Resource consultants representing various germane disciplines should be actively involved in this education program.
4. A carefully planned inservice education program for the entire school faculty should be undertaken to provide them with (a) fundamental knowledge about psychological, biological, social, and other dimensions of death and dying; (b) understanding of the learners developmental conceptions of death and dying; and (c) human relations skills for dealing with students, parents, and others death related fears and anxieties.
5. Curriculum materials should be developed within the school system rather than "plugging in" commercially produced packages.

6. Parents and students should be involved in developing the objectives of the death curriculum.
7. Value clarification should be an integral part of the planning process. It is extremely important that each faculty member identify and define his own value system with respect to death and dying.
8. Because moral, ethical, and theological considerations are inevitably involved in death education, planners must design instructional strategies that deal with these issues in ways consistent with the community value system.

Implementation

1. Death curricula should be implemented only after comprehensive planning and immediate evaluation strategies have been developed. Evaluation must begin immediately.
2. Death curricula should be implemented at the primary level and continued throughout all levels.
3. Death curricula should be organized as a spiraling theme.
4. An interdisciplinary approach should be taken.
5. Teachers should be constantly aware that the greatest anxieties and inhibitions about death and dying rest with the faculty and not the learners. Children and youth tend to be much more open in their discussion of death and dying than adults.
6. The valuing process rather than the teaching of specific values should be stressed in the implementation of the curriculum.
7. Various strategies or instructional modes should be used throughout the implementation phase and adjusted to meet the

emerging needs of the learners. No single mode of instruction has been demonstrated to be clearly superior to other alternatives.

8. Experimentation, creativity and openness should characterize the implementing of death curricula.

Evaluation

1. Evaluation should focus on the affective domain.
2. Processes such as loving, caring, empathizing should be stressed rather than the acquisition of knowledge. This does not mean that understanding technical information is not important.
3. Evaluation in death curricula must be a cooperative enterprise including all individuals concerned (students, teachers, parents and others) and extending beyond the physical boundaries of the school building.
4. Learning about death and dying should not be "graded" in the traditional sense. New evaluation norms stressing a hu[illegible]istic orientation should be developed.

Dissemination

1. There is an increasing dissemination of commercially produced products and learning packages dealing with death. Educators should scrutinize these resources carefully to assure that they are appropriate for the immediate community. The temptation to buy a death curriculum and and "plug it in" to the classroom instructional program should be resisted. Locally prepared death curricula are generally superior in terms of student and community needs.

2. Locally planned death curricula should be disseminated throughout the community before it is implemented in the schools. This is a reversal of the usual sequence.
3. A variety of methods should be used to disseminate death curricula. For example: community-faculty seminars, guest speakers, inservice workshops, print and non-print materials, etc.
4. Follow-up evaluation is an important aspect of the dissemination process. Feedback from the community and the professionals should be continuously sought.

Educational Importance of the Study

This research deals with a universal and enduring reality that permeates cognitive, social, affective and other dimensions of human existence from infancy through old age. A conceptual framework was created, applied, and found to be a useful analytic tool for systematically researching the multidimensional complexities of curriculum development. This is one of the initial researches focusing on the curricular potentialities of death and dying. Death is a relatively uncontaminated educational issue that can be used as a vehicle to develop, study, and improve strategies for introducing controversial and innovative curricula. Finally, specific recommendations are offered to improve curriculum practices.

REFERENCES

Bader, M. and R. Flathery. "Crisis, Awareness, Management" Project. Death education inservice program for hospital personnel. Surgeon General's Office. U.S.A.N.C. Washington, D. C. 1972-continuing.

Bennett, Roger and Marianne Everett. Death Curriculum and Inservice Education For Nurses of Terminally Ill Children. Pilot Study. Sinai Hospital. Baltimore, Maryland. 1974.

Bennett, Roger. Conceptions, Perceptual Defense Mechanisms and Affective Responses of Children and Youth to Death-Related Stimuli. General Research Board Award. University of Maryland. College Park, Maryland. 1973.

Bennett, Roger; Fiorillo, Rudy; Novak, Theresa; Davies, Charlotte; and Catherine Derby. "Determining the Perceptions of Need for the Inclusion of the Concept of Death in Public School Curriculum Among Selected Students at the University of Maryland." College of Education. University of Maryland. College Park, Maryland. December, 1971.

Bennett, Roger. "Interrelationships Among Curricular, Social, and Affective Dimensions of the Teaching-Learning Act." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Wisconsin. Madison, Wisconsin. January, 1970.

Children's Hospital. "Working With Dying Children and Their Families." Conference. Washington, D. C. July, 1973.

Goodlad, John. The Development of a Conceptual System for Dealing With Problems of Curriculum and Instruction. ERIC Report ED 010 064. U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Washington, D. C. 1966.

Goodlad, John. Planning and Organizing for Teaching. National Education Association. Washington, D. C. 1964. pp. 93-105.

Green, Betty and Donald Irish (Eds.). Death Education: Preparation for Living. Schenkman Publishing Company. Cambridge, Mass. 1971

Herrick, Virgil. Strategies of Curriculum Development. Edited by James Macdonald, Dan Anderson and Frank May. Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc. Columbus, Ohio. 1965, pp. 107-113.

Herrick, Virgil; Goodlad, John; Estvan, Frank; and Paul Eberman. The Elementary School. Prentice Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1956, p. 149.

Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation. "Choices On Our Conscience." International Symposium on Human Rights, Retardation, and Research. Washington, D. C. October, 1972.

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. On Death And Dying. Macmillan Company, New York, N. Y. 1969.

Leviton, Dan. Undergraduate course on Death and Suicide. Department of Health Education. University of Maryland. College Park, Maryland. Continuing.

National Child Welfare League of America. "Grief and Loss From Children's Point of View." Eastern Regional Conference. Washington, D. C. May, 1973.

Taba, Hilda. Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice. Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. New York, N. Y. 1962, pp. 301-307.

Macdonald, James. "Educational Models for Instruction - Introduction." In Theories of Instruction. Edited by James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Washington, D. C. 1965, pp. 1-7.

Weisman, Avery. On Dying and Denying. Behavioral Publications, Inc. New York, N. Y. 1972.